1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

THE VILLAGE SETTING

TABLE I

162 **Comparison of age-group distribution of Silwa Bahari and Egypt as a whole.[1]**

Age group	*Percentage of Total Population*	
	Silwa	*Egypt*
under 5	15·0	13·3
5–9	11·9	13·9
10–14	11·2	12·0
15–19	11·1	8·5
20–29	14·5	15·2
30–39	13·9	14·6
40–49	10·5	10·1
50–59	6·1	5·9
60 and over	5·7	6·3
unidentified ages	0·2	0·2

361 Like many other villages in Upper Egypt, Silwa lies at the foot of the Eastern Plateau. This physical setting divides the villagers' world in Silwa into three distinct parts: the 'hills', the villages, and the fields. The barren [823] 'hills', with their rugged dark rocks, though a source of fear and apprehen- [241] sion to the children, are not so inhospitable for the adults who rely on the [134] salty clay (nitrous soil) found in these hills for use as land fertilizer. The [345] village itself is composed of compact houses built of sandstone, which is available in the environment. There is hardly any planning in the village scheme, except for three main streets cutting across the village from east 363 to west and another main street leading from north to south; the first three forming the main routes from the village to the fields. The rest of the by-ways between the houses are narrow and twisted and are occasionally interrupted by heaps of stones and rubble. After 1936, owing to the increase ● 362 of village population, a new space between the old village and the railway line was allotted free by the government for building purposes. Most of this space has been built upon and inhabited mainly by those married sons whose parental homes have not sufficient room for their accommodation. 361 However, the finest buildings in the village are the two mosques. With [346] whitewashed walls, elegant and dignified minarets, and a floor covered with mats, these mosques represent one of the most cohesive forces in the [182] life of the villagers – religion.

[1] Here the percentages in Silwa are worked out from the figures given for 1947, but those of Egypt from the figures of 1937. Thus one could assume that the percentages of age groups have not radically changed. On the other hand, there are no details about age groups in Silwa in the 1937 Census.

342 3. Houses of regular design on the model '*ezbas*', such as those of the Royal Domains, the Agricultural Society, and a few individual landowners.

4. Shapeless huts made by newcomers and semi-nomads out of rags, empty petrol tins, palm leaves and mud.

5. Fieldshelters (*zarbiya*): huts built of reeds, or mere screens of maize stalks set in the open country during the period of heavy winter work.

But these, as has been said, are exceptions; the typical fellah house, representing 92% of the total, is of earth. It is a dwelling without style or age, which is yet one more sign of the persistent uniformity of the Egyptian peasantry.

361 Let us walk into one of the alleys that wind through
342 the clustered village. On each side the narrow dun-coloured
363 houses stand wall to wall. They may be from five to ten
362 metres wide, and about two and a half metres high, or at the most five if there is an upper storey. The quarter is old, and the village older still, but the house itself is comparatively new. This is because the materials and the methods of construction make the building impermanent. Fires, and in Lower Egypt the Nile flood and the rain, have necessitated constant repairs, which soon leave little of the original structure.

181 The dwelling of the fellah, like his work, derives its character from the soil, the manner of his life, and the social environment. The fellah is housed by the same earth that feeds him. He is a man of the soil in the true sense of the word. Here it is true that matter determines form.

333 The staple building-material is a mixture of clayey soil,
331 straw (from barley, beans, or flax), cow-dung, and Nile water.
342 This may be smeared over both sides of a rough framework of maize stalks, palm leaves, or reeds, to make the mud walls of the poorest type of house. It may be poured into wooden moulds to make crude bricks (*tûb akhdar*), which are dried in the sun and then used for building. The mortar used to join them is made of the same simple mixture, and so is the plaster which sometimes covers and protects the walls.

A wall so constructed, to be strong enough, must be from twelve to eighteen inches thick. A fellah with money to spare will build on a foundation of kiln-baked bricks (*tûb ahmar*) or of limestone rubble. This prevents the damp

352 and toilet use there is a large flat tub (*tisht*) which serves
353 as both laundry-basin and bath, a fragment of mirror, and
296 a big wooden chest which may hold almost anything. This
515 was a gift at the betrothal, and its crude colours are reminders of a red-letter day. "In this chest near the oven, whose key the mistress of the house wears at her neck, I have seen all jumbled together eggs, pepper, cheese, rags, needles and thread, several necklaces and a packet of *kohl*." This from the letter of a surprised French missionary.

181 The close proximity of men, cattle and soil is as noticeable
356 in the fellah's house as in the field and the village. It is a reflection of the fellah's social level and manner of life. Like house, like household.

The fellah's dependence on soil, sun and water extends even to his house. He himself is of the earth, earthy, through his labour and his food, in his diseases and finally in his death. His house no less, by the material of which it is made — floor, walls, roof and all — and by its very squatness is a part of the earth.

342 The fellah lives out of doors because of the lack of
362 comfort in his home, which is no more than an unfurnished
181 sleeping-place and a store-room, a part of the crowded camp
183 which is the village.

All the houses are alike. The fellaheen have little individuality; each is an atomised unit of the mass, and his household but one cell in the agricultural hive. At the same time there is little or no space reserved for agricultural uses. The fellah works for others, and does not store the produce of the land for himself.

Yet this dwelling, which lacks so much that we deem essential, is so well adapted to its tenants and their habits that they will change or rather deform into its likeness any better-appointed house built for them on a model *'ezba*.

342 A house on an *'ezba* belongs to the owner, one in the
421 village to the fellah. House and site together are worth at the most L.E. 25. There is no rent or house tax to pay. On an *'ezba* the dwelling enters into the conditions of lease or share-tenancy. In the village it belongs to the head of the family.

592 In this homestead scarcely larger than himself the fellah leads a life of his own, no longer as a serf but as a master. Each house contains a large family, including very often, besides the father and mother, four or five children, a grand-

×539 And when ye sing: "O Moḥammed!",
782 Go ye and come ye [— O Moḥammed].
But whoever fails to say: "O Moḥammed!",
Will lie, some morning, slain [— O Moḥammed],
In the bean-field, [— O Moḥammed],
He and his mother and the wife of his uncle!
[O Moḥammed].

1—4. Invocation of the Prophet Moḥammed.

2. "By Allah" is used to confirm the truth of what follows in the song.

[792] 3. Rāma is, according to Maḥmûd, a name of the mother of the Prophet.

5. Addressed to companions.

[192] [776] 8. "Go ye and come ye" is, of course, to be completed with: bis-salāme, "in safety". The road to the excavations is often long and the peasant-boy's imagination pictures ḥarāmîye (thieves) and 'afārît (evil spirits) lurking about everywhere. There is, in Cairo, a proverb, which runs: kullē ḫarâbe welina fîha 'afrît, "In every ruined house there lurks for us an evil spirit." In order to understand this proverb, it is necessary to remember, that in the native quarters of oriental cities, half or totally ruined houses are a much more frequent sight than with us. Moreover, Abu Gūrâb (the ruin of the sun-temple, see page II) before our excavations, was regarded as full of evil spirits.

[362] [172]

[241] [262] 11. In the spring, wide stretches of land are covered with the tall fûl plant or hog's bean. In Egypt this bean is an important element in the nourishment of man and beast. Compare No. 14, l. 2.

12. He involves with him in his ruin, even his dearest relatives.